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FLAUBERT: A REVALUATION

BY WILLARD HUNTINGTON WRIGHT

THE superstition that Flaubert is a transcendent genius has taken so powerful a hold upon the modern critical mind that for one to question his supremacy is to meet with a kind of contemptuous intellectual ostracism. Nevertheless, I intend to dissent from this current valuation: not only shall I question Flaubert's right to the exalted place accorded him; but I shall carry my heterodoxy so far as to deny him the right to hold a position even in the front rank of the great modern literary artists. My singularity of opinion is due to the fact that the æsthetic standard I adhere to is at variance with the conventional one; for, while I am able to agree with those who acclaim Flaubert a master of rhythmic and tonal expression, I still hold that style, no matter how perfect, is not of chief artistic significance—that, in fact, it is only of secondary importance when compared with the internal architecture of art. This poised inner structure is a quality I fail to find in any of Flaubert's work; and, without it, I do not believe there can be the highest creation, however blinding the beauty of investiture.

Let us first set down a few known facts concerning Flaubert's manner of writing, and then consider them in relation to that unique vision of form and method and medium which every truly great artist possessed. We know that he wrote very little. Four novels (one unfinished), a play and three short stories represent practically his entire production. He was, then, a notoriously unprolific writer, although it is well known that his labors were prodigious. He worked constantly and with intense concentration throughout his whole life: his exertions were of longer duration even than Balzac's. During these years of assiduous toil he concerned himself mainly with the perfection of details. He accumulated innumerable notes. We are told that he would read a hundred volumes for one page of facts.

It would take him many weeks to prepare himself for the description of one scene. He would write ten times the actual material needed, and then spend months on a scrupulous process of elimination. He made trips to the Orient in order to acquaint himself with an environment he wished to reproduce. His stupendous researches into historical and ethnological data required years of application; and his *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* was a slow growth through two decades. Moreover, these preparatory labors supplied him only with the framework of his story. He was equally meticulous in his fabrication of the book's verbal garb. Each sentence was constructed with the precision and care of a lapidary cutting a precious stone. He changed words, remoulded phrases, added and subtracted syllables, rearranged punctuation, balanced paragraphs: every section of his writings passed through numberless redactions. He worked for days on a single cadence; and every part was then related to the rhythm of the whole. No detail of style was so minute as to escape his consideration.

In view of these facts it is not difficult to determine the character of Flaubert's æsthetic. It was the clothes, rather than the body, of art which attracted him. The conception of his books—namely, the thematic structure which reveals the profundity of an artist's vision—was founded on a rigid externalism. Not only was it inspired by purely material observation, but its form was in large measure predetermined. It did not evolve naturally after certain forces had been set in motion. In brief, the content was not self-generating. Such organization as his books possessed was the result, first, of a single viewpoint toward which all the lines and volumes of the story were made to converge, and, secondly, of the verbal mould in which the document was cast. There was an order in his best works, but it was not organic. It was the order which follows a co-ordinating of data—that is, it was analytic, not synthetic.

That there was a preconception of documentary development is proved by the manner in which his themes took birth. We have recently learned that *Madame Bovary* was not an original story, but that both characters and incidents, with few variations, were adopted from life. Flaubert merely played the historian to actuality. Necessarily, therefore, he worked from the result back to the cause. It was the fact, and not the principle, with which he dealt.

Also, in *Salammbô* and *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* he attacked his problem by way of document. He built both stories on data he had unearthed in historical records. And, in *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, he sought only to reconstruct a certain political period.

It is broadly true, in reference to literary form, that the longer the period of incubation the less likelihood there is that the issue will be internally organized. The expansion of an idea from an abstract nucleus to a final concrete flowering is always a single and sustained process. The artist is merely the matrix in which the evolution takes place; and his style is the medium through which the new life is expressed. Form then becomes an inevitable result of the story's substance, and is dependent on the vigor and the quality of the conception. As the story grows, so must the form grow: the two are inseparable, the one being merely the symbol of the other. When the idea is more powerful than the writer's ability to project it into words, the result is uneven and labored. And when craftsmanship is the artist's preoccupation, taking precedence over the idea, the inner form loses its cohesive vitality and individual character, and becomes merely the means to outward beauty. This explains why the pre-eminent composers in all the arts—Beethoven, Brahms, Michelangelo, Rubens, Shakespeare, Balzac—are never the subtlest technical stylists; and it also explains why, without exception, they are prolific. Long and painful parturition is always vitiating; and the masterpieces of complete and satisfying form are brought forth during the sustained intensity of an idea's germination. Only at the expense of breaking or retarding the under-movement of an æsthetic conception may a creator halt the evolution of internal form for the purpose of elaborate and meticulous external embellishment. Indeed, such a method is possible only when the form has been statically predetermined; for an artist's creative impetuosity is inhibitory to long and protracted articulation.

In Flaubert's literary methods, as well as in the scarcity of his finished works, he exhibited a marked dissimilarity to all the supreme creators of the world. And when we analyze his methods we find that his æsthetic ideal also differed from that of other great artists. His primary concern was with external harmony; he strove almost exclusively for perfection in *matière*. Surface rhythm, and not profound

rhythmic movement, was the goal toward which he struggled for thirty years. Whereas the incontestably commanding figures in art made their style a means of expressing an inner form of document, Flaubert used the aspects of document as a means for creating style. In this he was eminently successful, for not only was he willing to sacrifice everything to this end, but he possessed a faultless auricular sensitivity and an unerring instinct for pleasing color and tone. Furthermore, he was able to remove all trace of effort from his work and to give it an air of spontaneous serenity.

The same criterion which has condemned Balzac for writing inartistically has exalted Flaubert for his dictional polish. This criterion is essentially feminine and fails to take into consideration the organizational, or masculine, element of art. But if we are to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of æsthetic creation we must base our judgments on both the feminine and the masculine constituents. We must seek for those abstract formal factors which are expressed in physical phenomena, for the two constitute a perfect unity of purpose. In music their relationship is more easily perceived, because the medium of sound is unable to convey a purely ethical or narrative idea. In literature, however, the document is so obtrusive that the abstract principles of composition are obscured.

As a result of this fact we have come to judge books by their transcriptive content and by their technical mannerisms. We cannot, for instance, regard document in literature as we regard sound in music—namely, as the voluminous medium through which abstract form is set forth. If the narrative substance of Flaubert were looked upon in the same light as are the notes in a Beethoven symphony, it would be seen that *Madame Bovary* falls far short of the highest æsthetic standard. But the book is approached literally and from without, and its beauty of integument catches and holds us on the hither side of its interior imperfections.

Style should be merely the glass through which we can see the glories which reside underneath; but with Flaubert the style is like a beautiful stained window which shuts out our view of what is beyond. The stylistic standard by which he is commonly judged is, in the very nature of three-dimensional art, superficial. It is founded on idealistic and, to a great extent, theoretical considerations. There is an

undeniable pleasure to be obtained from the precision of visual proportions, from the interplay of various and varied colors, from the flowing harmony and sequence of lines, from delicately balanced chiaroscuro, and from the subtleties of tonal gradations. But all these sources of delight are possible in two dimensions, as is exemplified in Japanese paintings and in the melodies of Schumann. Poise and movement in the deeper sense—that is to say, the qualities which imply living realities—are possible only in objects which orientate in depth at the same time that they are moving on a given surface. And it is in proportion to an artist's ability to state life in all its dimensions, to reveal the undercurrents as well as the ripples, and to reproduce the subterranean order of forces as well as the external proportions, that he is great in the permanent æsthetic sense.

In order to test the internal vitality of an artist and to gauge his power as a creator of universal scope, we must break through his surface and sound the depths. There, and there only, can we find the accurate measure of his genius. Flaubert especially should be put to this test, for, while with men like Beethoven and Rubens the style and form are perfectly welded and insusceptible of dissociation, Flaubert conceived his form first and then expressed it through a carefully constructed style.

It is not always easy to penetrate a writer's textural surface; but in the English translation of *Madame Bovary* we are able to determine Flaubert's form apart from the verbal music of his diction. There has been a very general condemnation of translations on the ground that they are detrimental to a just appreciation of an author's work. But in this contention there is not a little pedantry. The power of a truly significant writer is capable of making itself felt even if the verbal medium is not his own. Only in cases where appreciation depends on surface niceties, as in poetry or subtly melodious and representative prose, is adequate translation rendered impossible. When the merit of a literary work of art exists in its organic symmetry, little or nothing is lost by restatement in a foreign language; for the poise is preserved, and the structural proportions remain intact. Balzac, even in a poor translation, possesses tremendous force; and the same is true, to a large extent, of Goethe. Shakespeare in French and German retains his place in the forefront of literary creators; and the greatness

of Cervantes has for generations lived in the French and English versions. The integument, and not the inward substance, suffers by translation. Therefore when we examine *Madame Bovary* in English we are merely putting Flaubert's art to the same test that the art of practically every great writer has withstood.

The admitted fact that Flaubert loses more in translation than does almost any other prose writer, at once reveals the superficiality of his talents. *Madame Bovary*, stripped of its exquisite garb, is no more than a keenly analytic and wholly external account of a woman's disintegration under the corrosion of mediocrity. Flaubert places his characters under the microscope, observes every movement and change in their natures, and sets down each detail of their transmutation. We see them gradually taking shape as touch after touch is added; and in the end, when the picture is complete, we have a series of comprehensive and convincing portraits. But what we do not have is a complete vision of life brought to a small focus. We are not given a glimpse of the creative laws of nature. The mechanism of the human drama has not been revealed to us. We are affected because we have seen and felt a segment of life. We are not exalted because of having recognized and experienced the universal significance of life.

Herein Flaubert falls short of greatness. His creative method was not such as permitted the characters themselves to develop from within, as do the characters in Balzac. He did not set in action certain forces whose currents and cross-currents moulded and threw into relief the figures of his narrative. He traced back, from the person himself, the history of those currents, and showed the consecutive steps by which each character evolved. Flaubert revealed character: he did not create it. Emma Bovary, Homais, Salammbô, Frédéric, Antony—each one is particularized, consistent, and, in the personal sense, living. But none of them is universalized—that is, made genetically representative of all humanity. The difference, for instance, between Balzac's method of characterization and that of Flaubert is the difference between philosophy and reportorialism. In Balzac the whole is embodied in every part: in Flaubert the whole is visible only when every part has been laid in. In brief, Balzac was a subjective creator; Flaubert, an objective builder.

Flaubert, because he ushered in a new literary cycle—namely, that of naturalism,—has received the overvaluation which attaches to all pioneers; but we must not let his importance as an innovator blind us to his shortcomings as an artist. The very epoch he set in motion was trivially experimental. From Flaubert to Zola, only the obvious facts of nature were put to fictional use. Actions were substituted for ideas. Imagination in the constructive sense was without influence. The creative architect became the carpenter. This method of recording nature—as opposed to that of Shakespeare, Goethe and Balzac—is at once limited and self-limiting. It gives us a keen sense of actuality, provided it conforms to its own narrow logic, but it does not cause us to experience an *emotion* of the actual. Furthermore, it holds the artist to a restricted formula, the slightest digression from which results in a collapse of the entire structure. Its logic, being founded on the usual and habitual, must adhere to what is characteristic in life; for only the profound logic of causative forces makes the conventionally unexpected acceptable. That is why coincidence and melodrama in Balzac, for instance, are regarded as natural, whereas the same unanticipated happenings would seem false in an objective work of art. In the suicide of Emma Bovary we have an example of an episode which, though highly possible in a course of events similar to those of the story, is not rendered convincing. The logic of the book's development is too rigid and superficial to admit of such an exceptional act.

It is not to be implied that Flaubert was obviously false to reality. On the contrary he displays no inconsiderable amount of inventive perspicacity in his disposition of Emma. He makes her death eminently plausible. But if a book is to meet the highest standard of art, every episode must be not only plausible but convincing to the point of seeming inevitable; and, judged by this standard, the suicide is false. Flaubert himself evidently realized the fact, for in *L'Éducation Sentimentale* he eliminated all sudden catastrophes and adhered to the slow process of disintegration—a procedure which was echoed in Lilly Czepanak's fate in Sudermann's *Das Hohe Lied*. Because of this external logic *L'Éducation Sentimentale* must be given higher æsthetic rank than *Madame Bovary*. But with all its consistent accuracy, the book is episodic; and though many of

the pictures, regarded separately, are powerful and brilliant, taken collectively they are without that homogeneity which distinguishes an interdependent presentation of life from a mere record of reality.

Salammbô, Flaubert's second novel, exposes, perhaps better than any other book we possess, the limited possibilities of the naturalistic inspiration. The poverty of impersonal and dispassionate objectivity, as applied to æsthetic means, is here revealed in striking fashion. Not that *Salammbô* is an inferior work of its kind. On the contrary, it has many fine qualities—color, warmth, fascination, vividness, and a dazzling surface beauty. But the one quality upon which the dominant theory of naturalism is built—namely, convincingness—is conspicuously absent. The methods employed in this work are identical with those used in *Madame Bovary*; but the latter novel deals with modern and more or less familiar material, whereas in *Salammbô* the material is historical and unfamiliar. We have here an atmosphere of barbaric and mystic romanticism wherein life and thought are viewed from an angle quite different from ours of to-day. A great artist can resuscitate the past for us and make it living because he is primarily concerned with causes. But the art of Flaubert, and of all the members of his school, being analytic and dealing wholly with effects, was capable of reproducing only the externals of antiquity. We can admire Flaubert's ingenuity in thus restoring the past, and we can accept his characters as being faithfully representative of their time and place; but we cannot re-live that past, nor can we re-experience the struggles and emotions through which the characters are supposed to pass. In *Madame Bovary* we are temperamentally in touch with the conditions, and consequently can react to them. We are interested in Emma, but not in *Salammbô*. The one is relative to us, the other foreign. Æsthetically *Salammbô* was a failure; and so was *Madame Bovary*. But it was the failure of an entire creative system. In *Salammbô* the failure was more conspicuous merely because of the unfamiliar substance.

La Tentation de Saint-Antoine is even a less colorful reconstruction of history than *Salammbô*. It is deficient in Flaubert's usual lyricism, and its record of material is not seldom tiring. It is so highly intellectualized that its very naturalism is made difficult of access. The shortcomings

of the book will at once become evident when we compare it with *Faust*. The one is a specific account of a theme; in the other, the theme is the symbol of eternal values. Flaubert's superficiality is again revealed if we place *L'Éducation Sentimentale* beside *Wilhelm Meister*. Nor did his superficiality ever desert him. Georg Brandes has characterized *Bouvard et Pécuchet*—unfinished at Flaubert's death—as “little less than a wearisome series of abstracts from a couple of dozen different scientific discoveries and technical methods.” This criticism, however, should startle no one, for it describes the logical end of Flaubert's procedure; and it could be applied with more or less justice to all the naturalistic novels which followed in his train.

Flaubert once wrote: “Should you progress so far . . . that nothing, not even your own existence, seems to you to have any other purpose than to serve as an object for description . . . then come boldly forth and give books to the world.” In these words we have an acute criticism of Flaubert's own writings. For him the world existed as a model to be faithfully copied, and the reason that his books do not strike us immediately as purely stenographic is that he threw over them a golden and scintillant web of style. His art was therefore to a large extent spurious. In his implacable and unceasing pursuit of the simulacra, he ignored the meaning of life, which is its plastic content. And because no number of accurate trivialities can create an æsthetic unity unless they are related to the causes which produced them, he failed in the highest requirements of his art.

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